
NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

2 June 2026

Cabinet

Title: Ayrshire Growth Deal: International Marine Science and Environment Progress (IMSE) Update

Purpose: To provide an update on progress on the International Marine Science and Environment project, to seek approval for the strategic direction and to note the development of a Collaboration Agreement with partners Field Studies Council and Community of Arran Seabed Trust to support the further development of the project.

Recommendation: That Cabinet:

- a) Notes the progress to date and approves the strategic direction for the International Marine Science and Environment project;
- b) Notes the development of a Collaboration Agreement with the Field Studies Council and the Community of Arran Seabed Trust to progress the project and develop the full business case; and
- c) Notes the progression of the change management requirements and Outline Business Case for the project, informed by feedback from the Scottish and UK Governments.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The International Marine Science and Environment project forms part of the Ayrshire Growth Deal with an initial commitment of £10.5m investment towards marine research, education and industry collaboration. This forms part of the wider £251m investment under the Ayrshire Growth Deal which is a partnership between the UK and Scottish Governments and the three Ayrshire Authorities.
- 1.2 The report provides an update on the progress on the International Marine Science and Environment project, which has evolved towards a partnership-led, networked model, maximising outputs and outcomes through collaboration with established delivery partners, the Field Studies Council and the Community of Arran Seabed Trust. It seeks approval for the strategic direction and notes the development of a Collaboration Agreement with the project partners and the draft Outline Business Case, subject to feedback from the UK and Scottish Governments.

2. Background

- 2.1 Through the £251m Ayrshire Growth Deal (AGD) investment programme, the UK Government provided a commitment of £6.5m matched by £4m from North Ayrshire Council to the International Marine Science and Environment project. This was through the Energy, Circular Economy and Environment Programme which seeks to unlock the benefits of developing low carbon energy technologies and solutions.
- 2.2 The project aimed to create a world-class centre of excellence to drive innovation in marine science and establish the Firth of Clyde as an exemplar of marine sustainability in Scotland's blue economy. It was originally envisaged that this would include a flagship building at Ardrossan's Coastal Quarter managed by a single University with dedicated staff to promote entrepreneurship and innovation projects with emerging and established businesses.
- 2.3 Since 2020, North Ayrshire Council has explored opportunities to develop a blue economy innovation programme and associated collaboration opportunities. A pathway finder analysis report prepared by the University of Stirling in 2021, identified the potential for a nationally and globally significant blue economy innovation programme.
- 2.4 Cabinet approved a timebound Collaborative Agreement with the University of Stirling and FSC for two years in February 2024. This sought to achieve the submission of an outline business case to UK and Scottish Government, create a plan of works required for the creation of the full business case, or phased full business cases, and corresponding procurement works. Following the sad loss of Dr John Rogers, the Executive Director of Research, Innovation and Business Engagement, it was established that the University was no longer in a position to progress with its anticipated role in project.
- 2.5 To advance the concept of the programme and to support the development of a business case further collaboration has progressed between the Council, Field Studies Council (FSC) on Cumbrae and Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) on Arran. This has strengthened the opportunity, providing a cost-effective, lower-risk delivery route building on existing infrastructure and expertise. This has recognised that enhancing the existing offering at both locations and forging strong partnerships could significantly contribute to marine science, and blue economy research, development, and innovation in the region.
- 2.6 Through a programme deliverability review led by the AGD's Programme Management Office (PMO), the allocations under the Energy, Circular Economy and Environment Programme were reviewed to ensure that the identified projects could achieve their scope and intended outcomes. Further engagement with the UK and Scottish Governments provisionally confirmed a reapportionment under this programme increasing IMSE's UK Government allocation to £11.275m. The formal approval of this is subject to the submission and approval of the change management requirements and Business Case. This requires to be progressed through the Ayrshire Growth Deal's governance processes.
- 2.7 The collaboration with FSC and COAST is being formalised through a Collaboration Agreement to develop and maintain a partnership supporting the delivery of the IMSE

project and business case progression. The partnership will undertake further work to refine interventions including:

- Research and analysis;
- Concept design and infrastructure options;
- Development of innovation and challenge-led programmes; and
- Long and shortlisting in line with HM Treasury Green Book requirements.

2.8 The partners have agreed to contribute up to a maximum of £50,000 to support the work required by this agreement with roles defined as follows:

Partner	Role(s)
North Ayrshire Council	Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) Project Management and Project Management Office Liaison AGD reporting to Scottish and UK Government Funder Business Case development Growth Deals link (Ayrshire Growth Deal)
Field Studies Council	Site Operator expertise Landowner Academic, innovation and enterprise expertise Business Case development Island community engagement on Cumbrae
Community of Arran Seabed Trust	Academic, innovation and enterprise expertise Business Case development Island community engagement on Arran

2.9 Significant progress has been made in advancing the vision, with a strong emphasis on collaborative planning and strategic alignment with the partners. The project is being designed to harness the combined strengths of industry, academia, and environmental organisations. Efforts have concentrated on the co-design of detailed plans with stakeholders, laying the groundwork for a transformative project that will drive forward marine science, technology and sustainability.

2.10 The Outline Business Case (OBC) is being developed in partnership with FSC and COAST. The proposed approach aligns with national and regional policy priorities and responds to market failures in the Ayrshire marine sector, where significant economic potential remains underdeveloped. It positions the region's marine environment as an undercapitalised asset and proposes a coordinated cluster linking research institutions, businesses and communities and offering longer term sustainability.

2.11 The IMSE project will focus on applied sciences and bring together research and innovation activities alongside work undertaken by the partners. The project will support investment in these facilities to strengthen collaborations with universities and research organisations. These organisations already support significant grant-funded research and provide a strong foundation for future growth. By fostering collaboration and investment, the IMSE project will address the current lack of a definable research hub and limited cross-sectoral working.

2.12 The preferred option for the project is a networked hub model building on and enhancing existing assets and the marine science activities delivered at FSC in Millport and COAST in Lamlash. This offers the best value approach, managing risk

while maximising impact. It is anticipated that this approach will deliver strong long-term value, with benefits significantly outweighing costs and building on existing research capacity.

2.13 The IMSE project aims to:

- Develop a long-term partnership with Scotland's Universities, the Scottish Association for Marine Science, Marine Alliance for Science and Technology for Scotland.
- Grow the number of universities that collaborate with FSC and COAST and use the facilities at Millport Field Studies Centre and COAST in Lamlash from across Scotland, the UK and internationally.
- Provide employment and training opportunities for communities and attract professionals to train, develop new industries and encourage innovation and investment in Ayrshire.
- Provide educational and vocational training opportunities in partnership with Glasgow university, other university partners and Ayrshire College as well as attracting schools from across Scotland.
- Further develop the islands as visitor attractions, build links with the Marine Tourism project and use existing and new tourist operations to showcase the island's research and innovation activities and natural heritage.
- Extend the tourism offer and the average length of stay on Cumbrae by developing a marine, nature-based and heritage visitor attraction. Longer term there is an ambition to host training events for working in the blue economy and tourism sector.

2.14 Delivery will build on established partner capacity, ensuring confidence and reducing delivery risk. Procurement will follow established processes, with risks relating to contractor availability and compliance with subsidy control requirements identified and managed. The project is affordable within the revised AGD allocation, supporting investment in infrastructure such as laboratories, accommodation and monitoring equipment. It is anticipated that the project will deliver significant long-term monetised and non-monetised benefits, including increased investment in the blue economy, job creation, reputational gains and improved ecosystem health, building on existing research activities.

2.15 The formal approval of the reapportionment of funding under the Energy, Circular Economy and Environment Programme to IMSE will be progressed through the Ayrshire Growth Deal's governance processes. The draft OBC will be updated informed by feedback from the UK and Scottish Government. Thereafter the final OBC will be formally submitted to UK and Scottish Government and create a plan of works required for the creation of the Full Business Case (FBC), or phased FBCs and corresponding procurement works.

3. Proposals

3.1 That Cabinet:

- a) Notes the progress to date and approves the strategic direction for the International Marine Science and Environment project;

- b) Notes the development of a Collaboration Agreement with the Field Studies Council and the Community of Arran Seabed Trust to progress the project and develop the full business case; and
- c) Notes the progression of the change management requirements and Outline Business Case for the project, informed by feedback from the Scottish and UK Governments.

4. Implications/Socio-economic Duty

Financial

- 4.1 There are no financial implications associated with the Collaboration Agreement. Project development activity related to the proposals may require advance funding through the Ayrshire Growth Deal, as allocated within approved capital budgets.

Human Resources

- 4.2 None.

Legal

- 4.3 The Collaboration Agreement partnership with the Field Studies Council and Community of Arran Seabed Trust, has been developed with support from Legal Services. The draft Outline Business Case has been developed in line with Government Green Book guidance and subsidy control requirements.

Equality/Socio-economic

- 4.4 An Equality and Children's Rights Impact Assessment will be undertaken for the project.

Climate Change and Carbon

- 4.5 The ambitions of the project align with the adopted Sustainable North Ayrshire Strategy. Any statutory requirements related to environmental impact will be undertaken during the project's development. In addition, the Ayrshire Growth Deal business case requirements include carbon scoring and measures to mitigate and carbon increases.

Key Priorities

- 4.6 The project will contribute to achieving Council Plan priorities and the vision and priorities of the Ayrshire Regional Economic Strategy.

Community Wealth Building

- 4.7 The project will contribute to the Council's Community Wealth Building ambitions by supporting the use of land and assets, supporting job creation and skills and employability opportunities, supporting investment in North Ayrshire, supporting a just transition to net zero and securing anchor institutions within North Ayrshire.

Islands Communities Impact Assessment (ICIA)

4.8 None.

United Nations Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

4.9 None.

Consumer Duty

4.10 None.

5. Consultation

5.1 The Business Case has been developed and informed by engagement with sector leads from and academia, private and public sector stakeholders. Wider stakeholder and community engagement will be undertaken to inform the next phase of the project's development.

RUSSELL McCUTCHEON
Executive Director (Place)

For further information please contact **Bruce McClure, Senior Manager, Growth & Investment** on brucemcclure@north-ayrshire.gov.uk.

Background Papers

Cabinet Report, 20 February 2024: International Marine Science & Environment (IMSE)
Ayrshire Growth Deal project - Collaboration Agreement